

1972 Derry - "this was murder"



Troops were in Northern Ireland to defend British capitalist interests.

Forty years ago, on Sunday 30 January 1972, members of the Parachute Regiment (the Paras) shot 27 unarmed civilians, (14 of whom died) on a protest through the barricaded Bogside area of Derry in Northern Ireland. Eight of those killed were aged under 22. Six of them were 17 year olds.

The Paras shot Kevin McElhinney (17) as he crawled away from the soldiers towards Rossville flats for cover. Another unarmed demonstrator, William McKinney was shot in the back. Hugh Gilmore (17) was shot in the back as he was running away from the soldiers. Jim Wray (22) was shot twice in the back in Glenfada Park, the second bullet fired as he lay mortally wounded on the ground. Gerald Donaghy (17) was also shot as he was attempting to escape the scene.

Their 'crime' was to march against the government's policy of internment without trial, a law that also banned marches. The protesters were just demanding their civil rights.

Militant

The Socialist's predecessor Militant expressed the widespread anger at this atrocity with a front page article that said "Derry - this was murder." The article said it "will go down in history as the North of Ireland's Bloody Sunday."

The violent attacks were not new. In August 1971, for the fourth time in 50 years, the Northern Ireland government used its ferocious Special Powers Act to intern without trial anyone suspected of "acting or being about to act in a manner prejudicial to the preservation of peace."

Internees could be detained indefinitely - even apartheid South Africa had a 90-day limit! They could impose curfews, ban public meetings and demos, close roads and suspend inquests. By the end of 1971 almost 1,000 people had

been interned, predominantly Catholics but only a minority IRA members.

The army then stepped up its attacks. They took whole streets, raided every house, tore up floorboards, pulled down ceilings, demolished furniture. Those detained were hooded, subjected to sleep deprivation and other tortures. The Catholic areas fought back through strikes and non-payment of rent and rates despite attempts to take money from social security payments.

Militant warned from the day the Wilson government sent in the troops in 1969 that they would only defend British capitalist interests. In August 1971 we said: "The troops have been here for two years and still the violence remains. No matter if they stay another 20 years, if the basic grievances are not removed, the troubles will continue. Only a body which acts in the interests of the working class is capable of providing a solution".

More and more civilians became victims of army murders and assaults. In January 1972 at Magilligan internment Paras had hit out with fists and boots at demonstrators and fired rubber bullets. On 30 January, the bullets were lead.

Cover up

But the British state tried desperately to stop the truth coming out about Bloody Sunday. A tribunal established by Edward Heath's Tory government, headed by Lord Widgery, reported in April 1972. It infamously concluded that the soldiers from the Parachute Regiment were justified in shooting marchers, that shots were first fired at soldiers from the crowds on the streets in Derry and implied that those killed had been in close contact with weapons.

Both the Unionist government in Stormont, the seat of local power in Northern Ireland and the British government in

What deeply concerned the British and Unionist establishment was how rapidly socialist ideas and organisations inspired by the revolutionary events in France 1968 and the civil rights movement in the US were beginning to grow and challenge the poverty and class discrimination which blighted not just Catholic areas but also Protestant workers and youth

Westminster shared no blame. The Widgery Report was a complete whitewash; a cover up for murder carried out by the British state on the streets of Derry

Eventually, in 2010, the Bloody Sunday Inquiry, commonly known as the Saville report was published, 38 years after Bloody Sunday.

As Gary Mulcahy said in the Socialist after its publication:

"The report officially confirmed what everyone knew all along - that those who were murdered by the British Army on Bloody Sunday were innocent. What the inquiry has failed to expose or even attempt to explain, is what was the role of the Heath government in 1972 and the British army chiefs, in the events of Bloody Sunday and in the subsequent cover-up.

In the weeks leading up to Bloody Sunday, there were signs that the Establishment was preparing to shoot protesters. The then commander for British army land forces in Northern Ireland, Major General Robert Ford, was on record supporting the shooting of selected ringleaders of rioters, to set an example.

It was Ford's decision to send the Paras to Derry, a city with a large nationalist population, and major parts of which were 'no-go' areas for the RUC police force and the army.

Ford had visited Derry in January 1972 and wrote a confidential memo to the general officer commanding, Sir Harry Tuzo. Ford referred, in particular, to the so-called "Derry Young Hooligans", as a factor in the continued destruction of the city, and expressed the view that the army was virtually incapable of dealing with them.

The Derry Young Hooligans was a derogatory name given to the young people involved in fighting against state repression, many of whom were members of Derry Young Socialists, the youth wing of Derry Labour Party [then a left-wing organisation - Eds] - which grew rapidly in opposition to the Unionist state and the right-wing Nationalist Party.

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Marching through Derry in protest at the killings.

also Protestant workers and youth.

One soldier who gave evidence to Saville has written in his memoirs that as a 19 year-old soldier in Derry, on the night before Bloody Sunday, a lieutenant told his platoon, "We want some kills tomorrow". It is a fundamental flaw of the Saville Report that it concludes that neither the Unionist government in Northern Ireland nor the British government in 1972 were directly or indirectly responsible for Bloody Sunday.

Saville claims that Bloody Sunday is the result of several soldiers deciding independently to deliberately kill unarmed peaceful demonstrators, without orders from above, in the Bogside, which had been a no-go area for the state. This conclusion simply does not explain anything and lacks credibility.

There appears to be no comment whatsoever in Saville's Inquiry findings on why the Widgery report, which it strongly contradicts, was supported for so long by the Establishment.

Unfortunately, who ordered the shooting of innocent people with live-rounds, how far it went up the command chain

and who was involved in covering up Bloody Sunday still remain to be discovered. Prime Minister David Cameron said in 2010 there will be no more inquiries into the past in Northern Ireland.

The Establishment clearly want to bury the questions remaining over Bloody Sunday. You can have an apology but do not ask any more questions! Similar positions were put by politicians on both sides of the border while sectarian politicians in Northern Ireland, on both sides, will try to cloud the issues with their sectarian poison.

Workers' inquiry

Why has there been no inquiry into the deaths of other innocent victims of the Troubles, including many people killed by paramilitaries often for no other reason than they happened to be a Catholic or a Protestant? The families of these victims also deserve to hear the truth.

The issue of victims' rights to justice and the truth cannot be dealt with satisfactorily by politicians who were part of sectarian bloodshed, on both sides. They

are more interested in defending their own positions of privilege than unearthing the role sectarian parties, paramilitaries and the state played throughout the Troubles.

The working class in the North paid the biggest price for the Troubles. A genuinely independent inquiry, consisting of representatives of the working class, which examines the role of all participants in the conflict, is still needed to find the truth for victims.

Bloody Sunday was a defining moment in the history of Northern Ireland. The murders created the idea amongst some of the most radical Catholic youth that civil rights and 'politics' had failed and fostered the mistaken belief that individual terrorism was the only way to take on the British state.

Due to the absence of a mass socialist alternative, and the failure of the labour and trade union leaders, some of the most combative Catholic youth followed the false, counterproductive ideas of individual terrorism, which ultimately failed and cultivated greater sectarian division amongst the working class."

IRA led angry opposition up blind alley

The only force capable of overthrowing a modern capitalist state is the working class using the methods of mass struggle, demonstrations, strikes, general strikes and ultimately insurrection.

The real answer to the problems facing the Catholic working class in the early 1970s was mass resistance, appealing to and as far as possible linking up with Protestant workers in common action.

Turning to the IRA

And so the Catholic youth turned en masse to the IRA who seemed to offer a way to hit back. They joined the Provisionals despite, rather than because of, the right wing ideas of its southern leaders. To most volunteers the attraction of the Provisionals was the gun - the precise ideas they could deal with later.

At this time there were huge illusions that the IRA could succeed in driving out the Army, getting rid of Stormont and reunifying the country. Militant never shared this view. From the very begin-

Still fighting for class unity

The Socialist Party and its forerunners have consistently campaigned for working-class unity and the struggle for socialism as the only answer to the daily problems of life in Northern Ireland.

The IRA and the Protestant paramilitaries have agreed a ceasefire and the British army no longer patrol the streets. But socialists still often have to fight to overcome the sectarian division that is part of everyday life for working-class people.

A vested interest in division

The peace process encourages power-sharing between sectarian politicians who have a vested interest in keeping workers divided - otherwise they would not get people to vote for them.

Workers aiming to build a real socialist alternative to capitalism and sectarian politics were encouraged by the speech made (in a personal capacity) by Socialist Party member Pádraig Mulholland of the Northern Ireland Public Services Alliance gen-

eral council at the PCS civil service union Left Unity meeting in London on 7 January.

Padraig reported on the highly successful N30 strike in Northern Ireland: "Education closed down - 70% of all schools were closed. Universities, tech colleges, health, local government and civil service were out.

"There were no trains or buses as public transport workers, who are part of the local government pensions scheme, were also out.

"In Belfast and Derry every street had two or three picket lines. Belfast had a central demo with feeder marches from four different areas.

"We're well used to demos in northern Ireland, usually of orange or green Tories in the latest sectarian demo. This time it was Catholic and Protestant marching together as workers, taking action against the government."

Socialists fighting for class unity politics will take heart from this report and can build on this movement to raise ideas of a new working class political party and a new socialist society.

"The shooting came from one direction - the soldiers"

Eye-witness report from John Quigley, a socialist from Derry.

I was 15. My father took my younger brother and me. It was a great atmosphere, seeing thousands of people marching. We were at the back of the march and by the time we reached William Street the trouble had started.

We stood watching soldiers firing CS gas and canisters of smoke. The gas was very heavy. There were rumours that two people had been shot and people said they couldn't get into the centre of town. So everyone began moving towards Free Derry Corner where a meeting was expected.

We were going through the square at the back of Rossville Flats and suddenly from the back of the crowd everyone started running. We ran through the flats until we reached Free Derry Corner. Then the shooting started and I lay on my

belly. I'd lost my father and brother in the crowd.

The shooting seemed constant to begin with. Then it stopped and then there were shorter bursts, two or three shots at a time. It was not a gun battle - the shooting came from one direction, from the soldiers.

I lay there until the shooting stopped and then went to find my brother. People were milling around shocked, some people in hysterics. Then we went up towards Creggan and we were passed by cars taking people to the first aid centre in Creggan estate.

Word filtered through about the numbers dead. The numbers increased all the time, with people saying how they had seen boys shot while lying on the ground. The people of Derry know this was murder.



Troops vault over the barricades to attack the marchers.